

# **Notes on project management academic scholarship, teaching and research, and its relevance to practice**

*By Alan Stretton*

## **INTRODUCTION**

These notes look at various aspects of academic work on project management from the viewpoint of one who was a practitioner for nearly forty years before moving into academe, and has largely retained a practitioner's perspective on the discipline. We will look at academic scholarship, teaching, and research, and how they appear to me to relate to practice. However, we start with a broad recognition that there are two rather different perspectives on project management.

## **TWO PERSPECTIVES ON PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

As just indicated, I see project management with a practitioner's perspective – i.e. as a practical discipline. However, as Morris 2013:2 notes

....many scholars see [project management] more as a field of enquiry – a knowledge domain – than as a discipline.

As Morris indirectly implies, there are some scholars who venture beyond the knowledge domain into implications of their work for the practice of project management. However, on balance, these more inclusive project management scholars still appear to be substantially in the minority.

## **ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE**

Following on from the above quotation, Morris 2013:5 comments that

.... much of project and program management scholarship has tended to ignore application and impact – to be more concerned with means than with ends, with theory than with practice. Part 3 [of Morris 2013] argues that the academic value of project, program and portfolio management would be greater if we could relate theory more directly to practical benefits, that it should concern itself more with how project practices can make a difference to society's issues.

This certainly reflects the way I also see the actual and potential relationship between academic scholarship and the practice of project management. On the "actual" side I have generally been unimpressed by the practicality of much of what I have seen in papers in relevant "learned" journals, and in many of the papers I have been asked to assess for acceptance by refereed journals and conferences over the years.

The situation appears to be that most of these papers have been written by scholars for other scholars to read – i.e. reflecting Morris' comment above that many scholars see project management more as a field of enquiry – a knowledge domain – rather than as a discipline.

One typical example comes from Morris 2013:116 (again), when he says that

....many academics have become interested from an organisational theorist's perspective in projects as organisational forms. In doing so, however, they may not engage with the management responsibilities of people who are involved, or could be, in managing the 'whole project'. (Some would see the attempt as secondary to their interests, if that.)

Later, Morris 2013: Morris 2013:282 observes that

...doing project management and theorising about organisations are two quite different things.

My perspective is that I cannot see any point in undertaking any scholarly endeavours in an area like project management unless they show some real promise of ultimately helping improve its actual practice.

However, on the "potential" side, although I have not been in close contact with academe for some years, I get the impression that more scholarly attention is being directed in recent times towards contributing to actual project results.

Perhaps one indicator of this may be that we are seeing an increasing number of contributions by academics – some of them very prominent ones – to more practice-oriented journals such as this one. I very much welcome this trend, and can only hope that it will continue apace.

## **ACADEMIC TEACHING AND PRACTICE**

I will start this section with a substantial quote from Morris 2013:248, who is much better placed than myself to give this type of overview.

Historically, academia has been central to developing professions' knowledge. "Most professional education occurs in universities ... because professions rest on knowledge and universities are the seat of knowledge in modern societies" (Abbott 1992). But in reality this is rarely the case in today's world of project management as a whole, as a summative discipline – largely because *we have very few academics in project management who have ongoing experience of the reality of managing projects: very few would be called on by industry to manage or to advise on the management of projects.* They are not the seat of management knowledge: practitioners are. Instead, academics disaggregate the subject and research and teach its elements, generally from one particular theoretical stance.

When I moved from practice to academe in early 1988 to initiate a Master of Project Management course at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), one of the first things we had to do was decide the format of the course. My two academic colleagues initially favoured teaching the “elements” (e.g. what were then called the project management functions in the 1987 edition of PMI’s Project Management Body of Knowledge – the PMBOK). However I, and some other colleagues from practice, argued strongly that we should develop the course to facilitate answering the following question. “You have been given a project to manage. So, what actions do you now need to take to progress it effectively from start to finish?”

Accordingly, the core of the course was a generic project life cycle, with appropriate “elements” discussed as they naturally appeared. In the absence of good external guidelines at the time, we had to develop the generic project life cycle ourselves. We then progressively modified it as our experienced mature-age students contributed materials from their own experience. This was a learning process for both teachers and students, and equally stimulating for both.

The other factor which should be mentioned here is that project management is very much an integrative activity (e.g. Stretton 2016h). If you focus on teaching the “elements” (e.g. the PMBOK Guide’s knowledge areas) as Morris suggests happens (in the above quotation), you are most certainly disaggregating project management knowledge, and will be hard pressed to adequately represent the integrative nature of the actual practice of project management.

My position is that I very much agree with the proposition that Morris has made time and again over many years, when he says (e.g. Morris 2013:116)

...the project development [life] cycle is, for me, the one thing that differentiates projects from non-projects.

This places the project life cycle front and centre in my evaluation of knowledge frameworks and educational efforts in project management. I believe we would all benefit from having this perception adopted more widely in both academic and non-academic teaching approaches to project management.

## **ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Writing on the subject of “Researching the unanswered questions of project management”, Morris 2000 said of his analysis of papers published from 1990 to 1999:

1. Project management research has not been particularly oriented to demonstrating business relevance.
2. There is almost nothing at all relating expenditure on project management to business benefit.....

Whilst there have been practical improvements in the second point since 2000, notably with increasing insistence on the development of business cases, I have seen little evidence of really substantive academic research work in these areas.

I continue to feel that too much of the research work in project management remains insufficiently connected to the needs of practitioners. I say this with a background as head of a highly successful R&D department in Civil & Civic for some fifteen years. Admittedly our emphasis was on the development side of R&D, but I don't think this the basic reason for my unease about the research work presented in the literature.

As I see it, academic research in project management appears to have developed a life of its own, and a style of its own, some of which is quite alien to my (practitioner's) way of looking at things. As far as I can tell, academic research methodology appears to have become highly standardised, and based on academic value standards which are unrelated to the practice of project management. A good deal of the material I have reviewed in the past is evidently a product of the "publish-or-perish" academic school, and, quite frankly, too much of it has been of little, if any, value.

I think there is an associated problem with academic research, and that is that it focuses practically exclusively on going narrow and deep. Some thirty years ago I was doing substantial part-time teaching at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, and was being encouraged by senior academics in the Faculty of Architecture to undertake a PhD. I was keen to do so, but wanted to do research which integrated what I had identified as a whole lot of loose ends related to the building and construction industries. However, they insisted I do something narrow and deep. We argued about this for over two years before they agreed, most reluctantly, to my proposal. So, in a sense I had won the battle. But by that time I had moved well beyond frustration to despair with their approach, and had long since decided not to proceed with a PhD. As I have said before, and will continue to say, I believe the most utilitarian opportunities in project management are integrative ones.

Finally, based on my experience in how we went about R&D in Civil & Civic, I suspect that current academic research methodologies may tend to inhibit, rather than enhance, significant research breakthroughs. I also suspect that a relaxation of some of the more rigid academic methodological requirements might help produce research work which is more relevant to the world of practice.

However, it is also generally the case that researchers have little idea which areas of the project management discipline are critical to achieving satisfactory outcomes. So, there is an apparent opportunity here to bring research and practice closer together, and I believe that practitioners could and should initiate such activities.

## FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE TO STANDARDS?

Morris et al 2006 comment on the then current *The PMBOK Guide* (PMI 2004) in the context of the extent to which this document reflects findings in the research literature, as follows:

In fact, the *PMBOK Guide* and many of PMI's standards generally do not, in the Network's view [the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's Research Network – *Rethinking Project Management*, 2004-2006] adequately reflect the research literature, either in scope of topics covered, or in substantive detail rendered. It is important therefore for the research community to critique the limitations implied by these standards. If they remain unchallenged the discipline (the profession) risks being defined by models which ignore areas that are critical to achieving satisfactory outcomes. ....

At first reading this appears to be a reasonable observation, in view of the prominence of the PMBOK Guide as a guide to the practice of project management. However, there appears to me to be a gap in the reasoning.

It seems to me that the results of research effort not only need to be tested and validated in practice, but then substantially accepted and used by practitioners, before they can reasonably be incorporated into a standard such as the PMBOK Guide, which claims to reflect proven best practice.

It seems to me that the much more relevant point being made is one which Morris has been highlighting for years, and repeats in Morris 2013:54, as follows (his italics).

....a fundamental shortcoming: *The PMBOK Guide did not, and still does not, represent the knowledge that is necessary for managing projects successfully ...*

None-the-less, there is still a question as to how to get relevant research findings known to, and acted on, by project management practitioners. I have no ready answers to that. Perhaps we need a second type of "standard", which is future-oriented rather than past-oriented? This is rather a "way-out" thought, but does anyone out there have a better notion about how to bring the two closer together?

## SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

We started these notes with the key observation that there are two very different perspectives on project management out there.

- One is what might be called a practitioners' perspective, which is that project management is a practicing discipline; and
- The other is what might be called a scholarly perspective, which is that project management is a field of enquiry – a knowledge domain.

The basic theme of this article is that these two perspectives have been too widely separated in the past, and that both sides would benefit from a closer relationship in terms of academic scholarship, teaching, and research work.

Although I am no longer closely in touch with either academia or practice, I believe there are signs that closer relationships are being affected in some areas.

There would appear to be several possibilities for both academics and practitioners to initiate further cooperative activities, for the benefit of both groups, and ultimately, of course, for the benefit of project management at large.

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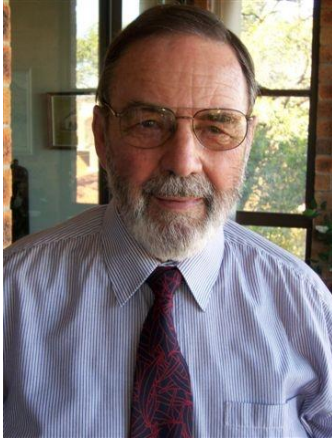
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